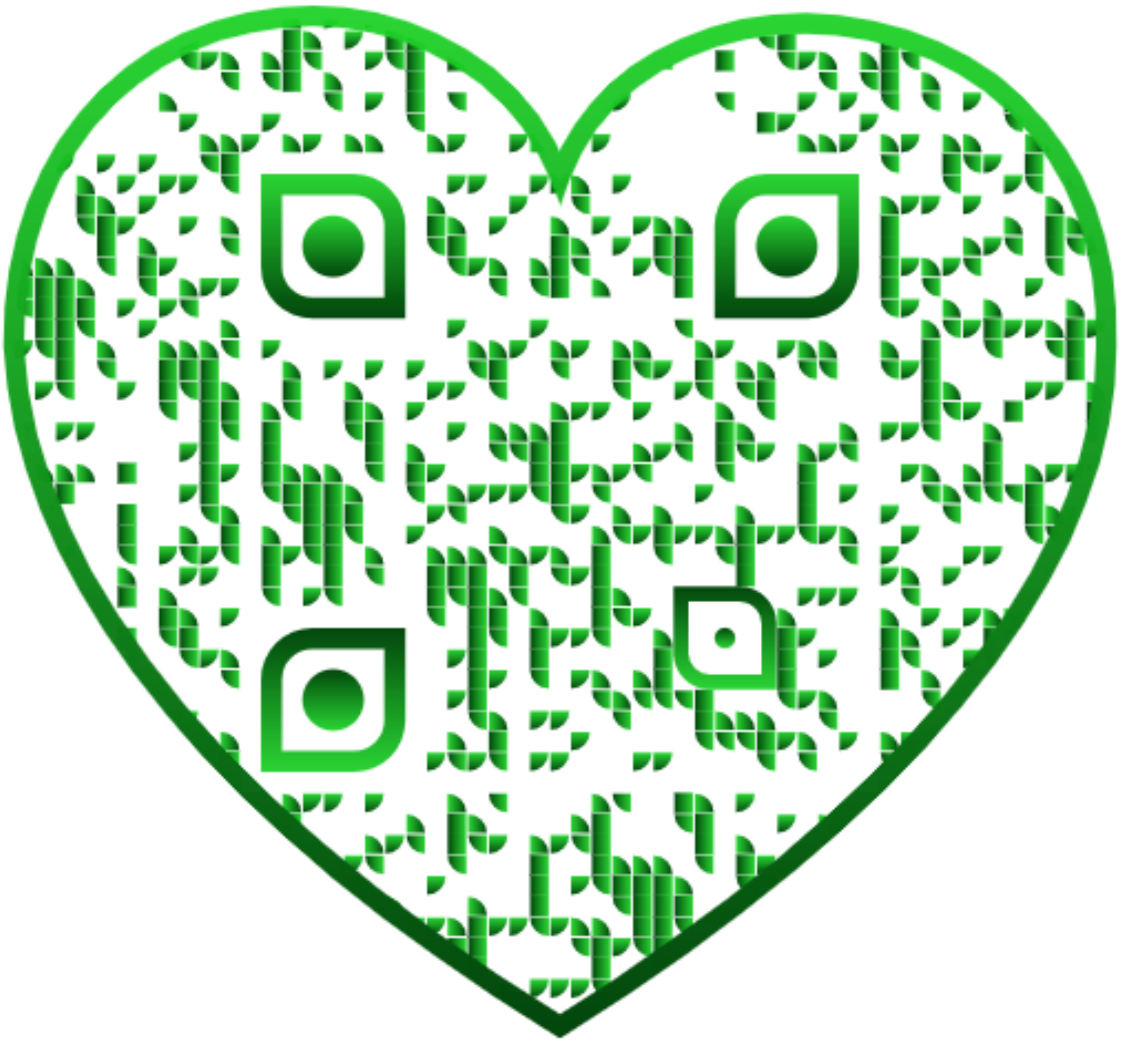
XXX
CHURCH
The 30 Day
Porn-Free
Challenge



Welcome

Welcome! I'm so glad you're getting proactive and accepting this 30-day challenge to find lasting freedom from porn. At XXXchurch, we believe porn kills so much of what we need in life, so we want to do everything we can to help people find a better, fuller, richer way to live. That's why we created this challenge that offers 30 days of hope and help via the advice of some of our best bloggers.

Over the next 30 days, you're going to hear a variety of perspectives on porn, what it is, what it isn't, and what you could be doing instead of consuming. Our hope is that you will feel challenged, inspired, and motivated to make positive change in your life so you can start making healthier choices online and in life.

I know you're going to love these next 30 days. So take a minute every day, step up, and do what you know is right.

Let's get free,

Craig Gross - Founder of XXXchurch

DAY 1

Quitting Porn #101 - You Gotta Want It

By: Carl Thomas

It's 7PM and there you are sitting in front of your computer screen. You look at the clock and wonder how the hell you wasted 3 hours of your day looking at porn. You think, "*How could I let this happen again … especially when I want to stop so bad!*"

Ever been there?

I have.

Here's the question sometimes we need to ask ourselves. Do I really want to stop?

When I was struggling with pornography and in the early stages of sobriety I'll be completely honest. The idea of never looking at porn again kinda freaked me out. I mean, life without porn? I couldn't even remember what that looked like. You see … it wasn't even so much a lack of faith or belief that I could do it.

It was being 100% certain I actually wanted to do it.

After all porn had been a pretty reliable friend. It was always there when I needed it. If I ditched porn what would be there to take its place?

I think a lot of people have a hard time quitting porn because deep down the idea scares them a bit.

Quitting porn means giving up their security blanket and that's not a fun thing to think about. They fear the absence of their friend so they really never truly go after recovery. They don't REALLY want it.

You gotta want it. You can't kid yourself.

You can't fake it.

You have to push aside the fear and have faith that a life without porn is way better than a life with porn.

You'll never quit porn because you really don't want too.

It's the difference between knowing and actually believing. If you believe that there's more to life than 3-hour porn surfing fests in front of the computer you'll start wanting that. And REALLY wanting it is what it's all about.

Because when you do, you'll go after it full-throttle and then you'll be able to set yourself up for real success.

Here's the BIG QUESTION. Do you want it … really?

If so then do something. This 30 Day Challenge is a great start.

DAY 2

What Is Porn?

By: Carl Thomas

My wife is a HUGE fan of the show *Friends*. She owns the DVDs, watches the reruns on TV when there's nothing else to watch, and jumped up and down when the show recently became available to stream on Netflix. Admittedly, over the years I've even developed an appreciation for the show myself. I think it's the rampant sarcasm that gets me.

Anyway, one of my favorite episodes is one where Monica catches Chandler (her husband) watching what she calls "shark porn." In case you've never seen that episode, here's a quick breakdown:

Chandler is away from home travelling, so to "unwind" he rents some hotel porn. Meanwhile, Monica decides to surprise him at the hotel, getting to Chandler's room and opening the door at the very moment when Chandler is wrist-deep into his pants.

Chandler hears the door start to open and quickly changes the channel to some nature show about sharks, but he unfortunately can't extricate himself from his pants quickly enough. Monica surveys the scene and determines her husband is masturbating to "shark porn." The rest of this very funny episode centers on Monica's intervention with Chandler about his "shark porn" problem.

Why am I talking about this? Well, it's not to get you watching *Friends* or even because the idea of shark porn is so funny (although it is). I think this episode actually brings up a good question:

What exactly is porn?

After all, we have hardcore porn, softcore porn, racial porn, gay porn, straight porn, even food porn. There are practically more categories for porn than there are episodes of *Friends*. So what is it?

I can't tell you how many times we at XXXchurch have heard this question. It often comes up in our online small groups.

Is _____ porn?
What about _____? Is that porn?
If it's not porn, then is it okay to watch?
And on and on.

We love to put labels on things and classify everything by a type or genre. Unfortunately, it's not that simple with porn.

Porn isn't so easily defined.
There is no checklist.

So, here is what I would offer as a practical definition for porn.

Porn is anything you use (watch, read, hear, or imagine) that's used to elicit sexual arousal outside of your spouse.

In other words, **if something gets you excited, then that thing is porn for you.**

So, movies can be porn even if they aren't rated XXX.

TV shows can be porn even if they are on regular cable channels.

Magazines can be porn even if you don't have to unwrap them or stand on your tippy-toes to get them off the top rack.

Books can be porn, even if they are called "romance novels." (Does that ring a bell, ladies?)

Talk radio can be porn even if it's not on the Playboy channel.

Social media can serve as porn for many.

Your imagination can even be porn.

Now, I don't say this because I'm trying to label everything as porn or because I want you to go out and sanitize your life of all "worldly influences." I don't want you to cancel your cable, delete your Facebook account (although that might not hurt for some people), and throw out your satellite radios. That's not my point.

I bring this up because **there is a better question than "What is porn?"**

That question is: "What is porn for me?"

This is the question we need to be asking ourselves.

If you struggle with porn, sex, masturbation, or whatever – take your pick – and you need to ask yourself whether something is porn or not, then there's a good chance it's porn for you.

I struggled with porn for many years, and in those days there was a lot that served as "porn" for me that wouldn't be porn for other people. There were many things that could trigger my desire to go, well, you know.

Thankfully, my boundaries don't need to be as strict these days. I can watch a movie and not be triggered to act out by a sexy scene. That doesn't mean I might not look away (and I often do), but that's a choice, not a necessity.

Stop trying to classify everything.
Stop labeling in an attempt to have super-defined boundaries.

Life isn’t like that. More often than not, we live in the gray, not the black and white, and our struggles are not all the same.

So next time you stumble upon something that stirs those lower regions ask yourself, “Is this porn for me?” Examine your heart, your mind, and your motives, and if the answer is “yes” then shut it off. Even if it’s shark porn.

DAY 3

Can a Christian Ever Really Be Free from Porn?

By: Paul Robinson

As porn addicts, one of the most important questions we need to ask ourselves is this: what do we want?

- Do we want to stop looking at porn?
- Do we want to not feel crappy about ourselves every waking moment anymore?
- Do we want complete freedom?

Most of us want all of those. If pushed, we say we want freedom, but really we don't want freedom; we want control. Think about how we talk about addiction in the church. We regularly say things like, "*Through God all things are possible*," or, "*God offers us freedom from our sins*," but in the next breath, we talk about porn and sin as "*something we will always have to deal with.*"

Are all things possible for God, except complete freedom from addiction?

As the saying goes, "*Once an addict, always an addict.*"

Really? Is our God that small?

Too many Christians are terrified of sin.

In fact, I would go as far as saying we have a very unhealthy obsession with it.

This is why, when it comes down to it, we don't want freedom but simply control. The Christian life for millions of us is nothing more than a game of *How Can I Not Screw Up Anymore.* We're so weighed down by the stress of not living a moral failure in front of others that we don't actually get to enjoy life as fully as we can.

And freedom terrifies us because it requires us to give up the need to be in control.

But true freedom for a believer in Jesus means we are no longer controlled by living up to certain standards set for us. If we really think about it, we have no standards to reach anymore, because there is nothing we can do to be accepted. You can screw up everyday for the rest of your life or never screw up again.

God welcomes you. Period.

It's like Brennan Manning writes: "*Real freedom is freedom from the opinions of others. Above all, freedom from your opinions about yourself.*"

Now some of you will read this as an excuse to do whatever the heck you like. Like Paul's warning in Romans. But this is anything but. In fact, Jesus spent a lot of His time trying to break down the control over people's actions that many religious people would use to keep people in order.

Countless times, Jesus opposed the very message that even today some pastors or books or churches provide: that we have to live a certain way or we are failures. But that's exactly the point! **We're *already* failures.** We're already broken and we're already in need of rescuing. You don't need rescuing because you stay up to 3 am every morning to look at porn. We believe that for Jesus to accept us, we need to stop; and so when we can't, we drown in shame.

The good news is not that if you just manage to keep your head above the water you'll be fine.

The Good news is actually much, much better than that.

It's that in the very act of letting go of trying to swim, we can learn to breathe.

You see the Gospel message is not one of getting our crap together so we look good. It's about laying our crap out for all to see and learning that our strength has nothing to do with how we appear, but rather in our honesty and openness to be real.

Having some sort of control over the sin in our lives may be important in the short term, but eventually we will simply get burned out and will grow tired of fighting or clinging on simply because we're not dealing with the deeper issues. This is why Jesus didn't just tell His listeners not to murder or to commit adultery but not to even be angry or think lustfully about another person.

Why? So He could put further unattainable standards and pressure on us to behave, like the Pharisees?

No.

He told us to not even do those things because ultimately there is something deeper going on when we murder. You can go your whole life without killing someone but still harbor deep anger towards someone that will slowly kill *you*.

So, too, with porn. Maybe you won't cheat on your spouse or hire prostitutes. But when you carry around pain and it begins to express itself in using porn, a quiet disconnect from the people that matter the most in your life creeps in.

If being free from porn is simply never looking at porn again, then great. But if that's as far as our definition goes, we're missing out on so much peace, joy, and life.

In Jesus' Sermon on Mount, there is no call to those who are well, who are healthy, who say and do all the right "Christian" things or who are not looking at porn. There is simply a call to come.

The people described in that sermon are not people whose live have worked out to plan. Yet, shockingly they are the ones called “blessed.” Which are you? I know who I’d rather be.

If you think you need to have your crap together before you are accepted, all I can say is, “*Good luck with that*.”

Because ultimately, freedom might mean you never look at porn again, but never looking at porn again doesn’t always mean you are free.

DAY 4

10 Things I Wish I'd Known When I First Got Sober

By: Frank Honess

Thinking back, I can see clearly now more than ever how much my addiction hurt my wife. I'm thankful today for my continual sobriety AND for my wife's continual healing, but if I could go back 5 years ago to my former self and share some of the lessons I've learned since then, I would do it in a heartbeat. Specifically, I would share with my past self some serious steps I needed to take to show my wife that I was for real about recovery.

Here's a list of 10 recovery steps I wish I would have taken before I got sober:

1. *Be 110% honest about your addiction*. One of the byproducts of being a sex addict is that you've basically become a complete liar. And while I told my wife about my addiction, I wasn't continually honest with her about porn relapses and chose to cover up, minimize, or even justify my actions.

2. *Confess everything*. The major idea here is that we as men are afraid to bear all of our weaknesses to a complete stranger, let alone our wives! But the more we deceive and try to skirt the truth, the deeper we go in our addiction and the more distance we put between those we love.

3. *Don't hesitate to give up all sources of struggle*. Believe me when I say this: You can live without your computer, phone, and tablet.

You can't afford to lose your marriage, your family, or yourself.

Even if it is for a season, ask yourself: "*What am I willing to give up so I can be free?*"

4. *Find support NOW*. While you are always accountable to your wife, it's probably not wise to use her as your sole source of accountability. Finding others who can encourage you and ask you the hard questions is the key. Accountability partners and a good support group can make all the difference between success and failure.

5. *Learn where the addiction came from*. Most likely, porn hooked you when you were young. It's important for your own life (and the welfare of your marriage) that you know the source of the addiction.

6. *Give your wife a brief weekly update on your progress*. My wife loves to know how I'm doing. And far too often, I just "assume" she knows that I'm doing good when I may not be. You don't necessarily have to go into extreme detail, but keeping the lines of communication open is always a win.

7. *Pray for your wife's continual healing*.

Your addiction has devastated her.

As you take action against sexual struggles, ask God to help her see the difference in your life. Encourage her to seek out healthy outlets where she can work through her pain, too.

8. *Be sensitive when she is triggered*. This was a very difficult one for me at first, because I translated it as her being upset or unhappy with me. But just as you're triggered by sexual stimuli, she will be triggered by a painful memory or feeling. Be understanding.

9. *Remind her every day of her beauty*. So many wives think their husband's porn use arose because something is wrong with them or that they are unattractive. And while we know this is untrue, our wives don't.

10. *Never give up pursuing sexual integrity*. Your wife needs to see that you're in this for the long haul, not just for a few months. Yes, it will be difficult at first to stay sober and there will be relapses. But becoming sexually pure is worth fighting for. Your marriage and your family are worth fighting for.

DAY 5

4 Unexpected Things That Happen When You Quit Porn

By: J.S. Park

When someone tells me that pornography doesn't do any harm to the body, I can only reply, "*Try to quit porn for a month. See how much better you feel*."

Really. Try to quit porn for just a month.

Two months.
Six months.
A year.

Write us about how you feel.

Many people are too scared to leave behind porn, because quitting any supposed "pleasure" in our culture feels like an amputation, or some kind of offense against our autonomy. "You can't tell me what to do" is the leading logic.

But the people who do take up my challenge to quit porn always thank me later. Why? It's because porn has such an insidious, destructive grip on the brain and body that ***you can always feel the healing when you quit.***

Here are four things that happen when you begin to quit porn.

1) Withdrawal.

The first week off porn is usually the most difficult—because your body has grown so used to it, you'll be overwhelmed by your appetite. The influx of images and craving can be almost too much to handle.

If you've read even a little research on pleasure and addiction, then you've probably come across the word *dopamine.* It's the little chemical our brain releases when we feel pleasure, and it largely controls our motivations and reward pathways. With porn, this whole process gets thrown off because you're drowning in dopamine. When you quit porn, your body screams for the same unnatural high.

In my first week off, I experienced nearly the same symptoms as heroin withdrawal: the shakes, sweating, fatigue, "brain-fog," and a compulsive urge to reach towards my source of addiction (the computer). I've read other reports of migraines, toothaches, dizziness, and a heightened fantasizing.

Most of us who try to quit porn are wholly unprepared for such intense symptoms, and it's often why we relapse so easily: because it feels like "quitting isn't working" and just one fix will bring us back to normal. But that's looking at the wrong normal:

Withdrawal is actually the fight for a true normal.

Preparation and awareness are half the battle. Here's a quick video on how pornography increases our habituation, escalates our urge for more porn, and some symptoms to expect when you quit.

2) Renewed Productivity.

Let's say your porn-viewing habits take up fifteen to twenty hours per week. That was my average. You're losing sleep, you're losing mind-space, you're losing time for projects and practice and personal hobbies.

I once calculated how much time I lost during my fifteen-year porn addiction. If I count on the low end of the average, I lost about *two whole years.* I could've learned a third language, or the piano, or fully qualified to become a NASA astronaut.

When you quit porn, you suddenly have a few dozen hours free every month. The self-indulgent hours are now open for something better.

The other thing is, *quitting porn also increases your quality of work.* You're well-rested instead of bleary-eyed when you get to work in the morning; plus, when your dopamine levels return to normal, you get more excited about what you're doing.

While there have been mixed reactions to this TEDx talk by science teacher Gary Wilson, a clear conclusion remains: an entire community of men who have quit porn have also found a surge of creativity, focus, and energy. This sounds like purely anecdotal evidence, but there are too many similar testimonies of "porn-quitting productivity" to dismiss as a coincidence.

3) Loss of Objectification.

Objectification is about what you do instead of appreciating who you are.

Porn turns sex into a dehumanized buffet instead of a sacred, communal gift bound by a promise. When we're bombarded with the cheap imitation of a good thing, we lose authentic connection.

Maybe the best thing about quitting porn is that only weeks after, my brain slowly killed those dirty fantasy loops. You know what I mean. It's that visual playground of objectifying daydreams that makes you feel guilty and awkward at social gatherings all the time.

Soon after I quit porn, I could talk to women without the terrible layer of sexualization in my head.

Please believe me: this is an embarrassing thing to talk about. At the worst moments of my addiction, I found myself objectifying dang near *everything.* Even the shape of a glass or a cartoon female would drag my brain into bad places.

At times I thought that pornography had completely broken this part of me and I would never get over it. But quitting such excessive intake of indulgent imagery, while never fully erasing that inner-tape, can bring us back to healthy interaction. It takes time, but **authenticity returns when we appreciate the real thing**. Which leads us to:

4) Renewed Connection and Intimacy.

In an instant-access world, pornography allows a short-term hold on control where we can avoid rejection and the all-terrible "No."

It's an illusion, but I understand the urge for it. A constant "Yes" is so seductive.

The problem is, the world is full of messy, clumsy, uncertain intimacy with no guarantees and no promises of reciprocity. And while porn seems to offer constancy, it's a robotic yes-man that only flatters and never challenges, and in the end says a deafening *No* to the very thing we're looking for: real, authentic connection where the person you love returns the very same love.

To settle for less than true intimacy only isolates you into fear. I understand the fear: but we cannot say No to rejection while saying Yes to acceptance at the same time. Human interaction requires the good and the bad, the heaven and the heartache, the bliss and blisters. The deepest laughter can be born in side-by-side grief, just as grief is overcome by the fiercest of loyalty and joy.

When you quit porn, it means you risk the unpredictable maze of the human experience. I'm not overstating the case here. There are plenty of developmentally stunted young adults who cannot bear to endure rejection or even a friend who's having a bad day, because they're so used to clicking the kind of "friend" they want to have.

While it sounds safe to stay in a cave with a computer all the time, **porn only makes you less human, and not more.**

The goal of faith, of discipline, of intimacy, of connection, is to make you more human.

Quit porn. Leave behind the false, hollow derivatives: and you'll find all the richness of life that you were meant to discover.

DAY 6

3 Ways to Look and Not Lust

By: Carl Thomas

If you are a guy and have been involved in some sort of accountability group (like an online small group), no doubt the subject of “lust” has come up. In my group on Wednesday mornings we talk about this often.

Usually the conversation focuses on 3 things:

1. What is lust?

2. How do I not lust?

3. What do I do when I lust?

All 3 of these questions could make for their own post, but for the sake of brevity I rather just focus on the second: How do I not lust? Or, more specifically, How do I look and NOT lust?

But before I do I would like to clarify what lust is and isn’t:

Lust IS NOT looking.

Lust is letting your mind wander to sexual thoughts AFTER looking.

You see, lust is not this thing that just happens.

It's not spontaneous.
It's not random.

Lust grows.
It's in many ways organic.
And it has its own lifecycle.

So when you or I look at an attractive person, we aren't lusting… but it's at that moment when the lifecycle can start to unfold.

So, with that being said, here are 3 things you can do to make sure your looks don't turn into lust (and no, I'm not going the whole "bounce your eyes" route either):

1) Count your "looks." Around here at XXXchurch, we have a saying:

> *Look once, you're human; look twice, you're a man; look three times, you just disrespected your wife.*

Now before you get all legalistic, realize that we don't really boil lust down to the exact number of times you "look." But the point here is simple; if you keep glancing and looking, chances are you aren't doing it because you admire that individual for their personality. Most likely you're continuing the looks because you get some sort of pleasure from what you see.

Simply put, this is a discipline and it takes practice. But if you are conscious of how many times you eye up someone, you'll also be more aware of the when the lust monster starts knocking at your door.

2) Follow up your look with an action. Okay, so to be clear, not ANY action will do. There are, of course, some actions that would be really inappropriate or maybe even land you in jail.

What I'm talking about is more of a spiritual thing. When you see that "hot" lady jogging by in her form-fitting shorts and top, don't just look and let your thoughts get taken over by something unhealthy.

Be more intentional.

This is what the Bible means when it says to take your thoughts captive.

Maybe pray for her (and not because she's some sort of "Jezebel" wearing tight clothes—she probably isn't). Or think about how that woman is someone's daughter or wife and deserves respect, not objectification. Or just recognize that a moment of decision has arrived and you are deciding NOT to lust but rather to think about something else.

Remember, lust has to grow. You can kill that growth with some solid intentionality.

3) Give glory to God. What? Wait a minute? Give glory to God for the "hot" jogger I just saw?

Yes. Exactly.

The Bible tells us to glorify God in all things and give him glory for all things.

This means…

You glorify God for what happened in church on Sunday.
You glorify God for the promotion you just got.
You glorify God for the beautiful sunset you just witnessed.

And yes, you can glorify God for creating the beautiful jogger who just ran by.

Don't be a legalistic tool and think it's impossible to see an attractive person and appreciate their beauty without being some sort of perv. You can.

Remember … looking is not lusting.

Lust doesn't just happen; it's cultivated.

Next time you see someone who hits a "10" on your hotness scale, take a minute and say, "*Thank you God for creating that person*." Then, move along and continue with your day.

I hear so many Christians bemoan about lust and how visual distractions are all around them.

It's true; you will always see beautiful people. Sometimes wearing clothes that leave less to the imagination. But remember:

Lusting isn't inevitable. Lust is a choice.

You can stop lust by killing it at the root.

So next time you see someone who's looking good, remember these three steps:

1. Count the looks.

2. Be intentional with your thoughts

3. Say "*Thank you Jesus!*"

If you do these 3 things and go about your day, you will halt lust in its tracks. Because the "battle of lust" begins where it dies … in your mind.

DAY 7

3 Ways to Move Past Sexual Regret

By: J.S. Park

Before we get to the 3 Ways....we want you to learn from this story.

Monica Lewinksy, the notorious center of the scandal that will forever plague former President Bill Clinton, made a remarkable statement in her recent TED Talk:

> *"I was Patient Zero of losing a personal reputation on a global scale almost instantaneously."*

Ms. Lewinsky sums up,

> *"We have slowly been sowing the seeds of shame and public humiliation in our cultural soil. Gossip websites, paparazzi, reality programming, politics, news outlets and sometimes hackers traffic in shame. A marketplace has emerged where public humiliation is a commodity and shame is an industry."*

The internet was still in infancy in 1998 when Ms. Lewinsky had the most well known affair in American history.

Today, you can have instant infamy at a simple click–the public eye has become a regulator for outlandish behavior, and this kind of public shaming can be a good thing.

But "sexual shaming" is a much more profound problem. It has entirely different repercussions and a viciously haunting stigma.

It seems nearly impossible to live down a sexual regre in both private and public circles.

To admit anything else—alcoholism, gambling, gang affiliation, depression—is a victorious confession, but to admit sexual issues—porn addiction, fetishes, regretful sexual encounters—too often sounds a death knell on your whole character.

So what's the solution?

I don't think, of course, that all this can be solved in a day. But there are at least a few ways we can begin to move the needle on our hasty quick-click culture. These might be very obvious, but we've perhaps become so desensitized to a shame-culture that our shaming has become a reflex.

1. The first is empathy, or humanization. It's easy to forget that the people in memes and reblogs and tweets are actually people with the same hopes, insecurities, dreams, and goals that we have. No one is a one-dimensional soundbite or the cartoon caricature we imagine them to be. Each person has layers, conflicts, and a whole back-story to how they came to this mess.

It doesn't mean we cater to someone's wrongdoing. It doesn't mean we excuse irresponsibility. It only means to openly acknowledge that this problem could've easily been caused by you. By me. By anyone. If not that problem, then certainly something else or something worse. If we have to comment, I hope we're offering the benefit of the doubt and a bit of compassion alongside our firm convictions.

2. The second is conversation. It goes both ways: both for the one being shamed and the one doing the shaming. Instead of calling someone out through sarcasm or satire, even when it feels right, it would be even better to dialogue openly about what we're thinking. To shame someone's racist Twitter account might only bury their racism. An external shaming will only modify someone's external behavior without really getting to the internal root of bigotry.

Instead of accusation, which works about zero percent of the time, it might be better to ask, *Why do you believe that? Where did you hear it from? How is it true?* It's how Daryl Davis, a black musician, was able to singlehandedly dismantle the Ku Klux Klan in Maryland, by challenging the leaders with pointed, open-ended questions.

When someone has a sexual regret, then dialogue is just as crucial. We each need a safe place to talk about our regrets, no matter how sordid they may be.

A person who regrets their past has already been shamed by their own guilt for long enough.

They already walk into their home and their church and their workplace with a storm-cloud of remorse chasing after them. **We can either be a voice that someone must overcome, or a voice that helps someone overcome.** I want to be the one who can help part the clouds, so that we can be free to move forward.

3. The third is grace. By grace, I mean offering a second chance. A third chance. A tenth.

By grace, I mean giving yourself a chance to move on from what has happened and what you've done. It means freedom from self-punishment and over-compensation.

By grace, I mean the expectation of a new life for yourself and for others, who want to reclaim their lives from their former selves.

By grace, I mean believing that you are loved by your Creator, by your community, and those who truly know you. It means believing you have a purpose that has not been devalued by your past, but could only be strengthened by it.

By grace, I mean entering the fractured lives of others to pick them up from the wreckage and rebuild what can be salvaged, with both eyes ahead, to a better future.

As Ms. Lewinsky said ...

> *" time to take back my narrative. Anyone who is suffering from shame and public humiliation needs to know one thing. You can survive it. I know it's hard. It may not be painless, quick or easy, but you can insist on a different ending to your story."*

DAY 8

How To Rewire Your Brain And Body From Addiction

By: Craig Gross

Whether you're trying to learn how to hit a curve ball, dribble with your left hand or fade a 7 iron, it takes practice, patience, commitment and time. The same is true for achieving a lasting and meaningful recovery from sexual addiction.

If your history of using sex to medicate your feelings of unworthiness started over 35 years ago then you are not going to rewire your body and brain back to normalcy overnight.

There's a saying that if you walk 5 miles into the woods, it's at least a 5 mile walk out. I'm not saying that you have a 35-year journey to recovery, but the unhealthy thinking over the past 35 years will need to be rewired and it will take time.

I believe one of the best traits a recovering person can have is patience.

Often times we want the quick fix or the get rich quick scheme instead of the "slow and steady" way of the turtle. In my work with recovering sex addicts I often see the individual that comes to a meeting the first day and is so gung ho and wants to recover TODAY!

While I admire their enthusiasm and don't want to dash their dreams I believe the only way true recovery can work is by implementing the "one day at a time" attitude.

When I'm feeling:

- Angry
- Lonely
- Anxious
- Fearful

…it's much easier and in many ways seems much more normal to revert back to old ways of thinking; "If only I looked at some porn I'd feel better." Or, "If only I masturbated or hooked up with so and so, then I'd feel better." But in the end, I'm not making myself a better person by giving in.

Instead, I have to put in the hard work to make my new tools more effective.

The 6 daily tools of my recovery are:

- I need to spend every day connecting with a community and share what's going on in my life.
- I need to tell those close to me how I'm feeling so they get to know me and see my struggles.
- I need to be vulnerable.
- I need to spend quiet time connecting with God through prayer and the bible.
- I need to learn to turn my troubles over to God and have faith that he is guiding my path.
- I need to ask for help.

But I can't start this and expect instant relief. The truth is, I have to be patient and I have to be committed and I have to let time work its magic. I believe the program of recovery is a program of action. **I need to take action**, whatever that looks like and however small a step it is, but **I need to take it NOW**.

And I need to take it the next day and the next day until I have a whole bunch of good activities piled on top of each other. Then and only then will my mind and body start to be rewired and the end result will be a better, happier, more peaceful me. A me that makes this world a better place. A me that my loved ones and I can be proud of.

So what are you going to do today? Not tomorrow. Today.

Take action now.

DAY 9

Don’t Be a Victim to Your Porn Addiction

By: Forest Benedict

You are not helpless against your porn addiction. Neither am I. Yet, we so often act as if there is nothing we can do in this battle against temptation, going with the flow rather than fighting for our freedom.

To make matters worse, many remain in a state of blame for their behavior. From the beginning of time, it seems we humans have voraciously sought out someone or something to hold responsible for personal choices.

Heaven forbid we look in the mirror and ask “what choices led me here” or “what choice can I make now?”

Instead, we often remain in victim mode, scanning the landscape for reasons why we *had* to give in or reasons why we *can’t* change.

If we look for excuses to look at porn, we will find them. I hear them all the time…

“I don’t get enough sex.”

“I just have a high libido.”

“I’m on vacation.”

“I was alone and tired.”

“I don’t know how to get free.”

“I’m just doing what men do.”

“I’m an addict.”

“The devil made me do it.”

It seems that we’ll blame any feeling, person, circumstance, time of day, impulse, or desire for our choice to give in.

I know this mentality all too well. Most of my life I camped out in the valley of a victim mindset. It did not serve me but instead made me feel stuck when I wasn’t. But I credit much of my success in my personal fight against porn addiction to choosing no longer to be helpless against my addiction or other contributing factors. This lesson did not come cheaply or easily. I invested much time and money to acquire it. The “secret sauce” of my success is taking personal responsibility for my recovery. I don’t always succeed but almost every time I remind myself that I am choosing *most* of my circumstances and *all* of my responses, I regain my power. Fighting against victim mentality is a daily battle. I believe this is some of the most significant work for anyone in active recovery.

What keeps us feeling stuck is our addiction to our excuses. Sadly, most do not passionately pursue healing until life “makes” them do it. They face painful consequences of potential divorce, court involvement, job loss, and countless other “wake-up calls.” While these things momentarily motivate change, it does not last. How could it, when they base their recovery on their circumstances not on their decisions? In these cases, once the situation cools down, so does their motivation.

I write this at the risk of *sounding* insensitive. I really do care about the pain of others.

I know many truly are victims of abuse and injustice and I do not want to downplay the sadness of those situations. I have deep wounds of my own. From moods to mental illness, many of us struggle in many ways. But if we're not careful, we can begin to blame these things for the life we are choosing. This is a trap. These life experiences are not reasons to relinquish responsibility. We still have choices. We can live a life of victimhood and justification but this will never lead to healing.

I share this perspective because I know most people are acting powerless against porn when the reality is they are not. There are many things they continue to do to choose staying stuck on that path. I am not saying they *want* to stay there. I honestly believe many *want* to change. But that doesn't mean they are *willing* to change; willing to do everything it takes to change.

When we take responsibility for our recovery, we courageously acknowledge our countless choices. We can still admit our weaknesses and deficiencies but they do not mean we are helpless. We can choose to not let those keep us down. We can research alternatives. We can ask questions. We can seek support. We can choose community. We can pursue spiritual connection. We can choose to never give up.

God's word says there is a way *out* of all temptations. Yet too often we look for every possible way *into* temptation. If we believe there is *always* a way out, how hard will we look for it? To what lengths will we go to make sure we find it?

For those tired of getting tossed around by temptations, I urge you to honestly ask yourself the following questions:

How am I pretending I am helpless against porn?

In what ways am I making myself vulnerable to temptation?

What needs to change in my life to help me tap into God's strength and the support of others?

What are my blind spots and what resources will help me see the truth in these areas?

What wounds have I ignored throughout my life that are in need of my attention?

What strengths, gifts, and abilities can I leverage in my recovery?

Will I choose a passive or passionate stance against temptation?

Whose hand can I reach out to for help?

When we steadfastly seek answers we will find them. Please note, this is not about blaming or shaming ourselves. Taking responsibility is about becoming empowered. It's about seeing what we did to get here and what else we can do right now. We will lack the freedom we desire in our recovery as long as we pretend that it doesn't exist.

Will you take responsibility for your recovery?

When you do, the possibilities are endless.

Sure, you can go on pretending you are helpless. That's your choice. But I believe you can choose a better life than that. I know I want a better life than that.

Be empowered. You are resourceful. You are creative. You have options. I echo the challenge of Joshua 24:15 to "***choose*** this day whom you will serve". You can choose addiction or recovery; death or life.

May we all choose life (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

DAY 10

9 Reasons Men Should Stay Away from Porn

By: Tyler Ward

Pornography has little to do with sex and everything to do with fantasy. And if not confronted, this addiction to fantasy can become a consuming fire threatening all quality of life.

So before you go looking again for that woman on the screen, here are nine reasons to stay away from porn.

1. Porn makes you unhappy and bored.

Research says that those who regularly indulge themselves in pornography are more likely to have higher levels of anxiety and depression and lower levels of self-esteem than those who don't.

The brain is to blame for this.

Apparently, as one artificially stimulates the pleasure center of their brain with porn, it perpetually weakens in its ability to respond to natural kinds of pleasure.

Before we know it, real life has to compete with the unnatural and artificial levels of chemical excitement that porn offers. Real life—and our marriage—often lose this competition.

Pamela Paul, the author of *Pornified*, puts it this way:

> *"Pornography leaves men desensitized to both outrage and to excitement, leading to an overall diminishment of feeling and eventually to dis- satisfaction with the emotional tugs of everyday life . . . Eventually they are left with a confusing mix of supersized expectations and numbed emotions . . . and become imbued with indifference. The real world often gets really boring."*

Sex with our wives proves to be quite a different story. The natural chemicals and pleasure real sex creates doesn't inflate our expectations or numb our emotions. According to studies performed by the Institute for the Study of Labor, real sex actually makes us happier. The same studies also show that married people have more sex than those who are not married, and even experience far higher levels of satisfaction in life.

2. Porn neuters you.

Some people believe that pornography can add excitement to their sex life. However, studies prove just the opposite. Porn actually produces less intimacy between partners, less romantic excitement, and less satisfaction in real sexual experiences.

Dr. Mary Anne Layden writes in The Social Cost of Pornography,

> *"I have also seen in my clinical experience that pornography damages the sexual performance of the viewers. Pornography viewers tend to have problems with premature ejaculation and erectile dysfunction. Having spent so much time in unnatural sexual experiences with paper, celluloid and cyberspace, they seem to find it difficult to have sex with a real human being."*

Because of pornography, men have trouble getting turned on by their wives who happen to not be cybersex slaves. As a result, they don't enjoy real sex nearly as much as they used to. This is because porn makes us less satisfied with our partner's affection, physical appearance, and sexual performance.

On the contrary, when porn isn't a part of marriage, real sex proves to only get better with time. Sociologist Mandi Norwood discovered this socially unenforced reality after interviewing several hundred women. She found that married women are satisfied in the bedroom because of years of practice, less inhibitions, and the time to learn their partner.

3. Porn is not manly.

Though conquering that woman on the screen in your mind may make you feel like a man, there's nothing manly about it.

Real sex involves you. All of your fears. All of your insecurities. All of your capacity to give.

It also involves another very real person. All her needs. All of her baggage. All of her propensity to judge you and hurt your dignity.

Porn requires no work, no sacrifice, and no maturity. Real sex in marriage requires you to risk, to be vulnerable, to give yourself fully to another person. This kind of intimacy is not for boys. It's for men only.

4. Porn doesn't make friends.

Studies show that men who use porn commonly become isolated from others, highly introverted, narcissistic, dissociative, and distractible. In other words, it doesn't exactly make you a likable person.

Neurochemistry teaches that the more that you bond with fantasies on your computer screen, the harder it is to actually bond with real people. This is because the strongest bonding substance in our lives is oxytocin—the hormone released during orgasm.

As this powerful bonding substance becomes consistently associated with porn, it becomes easier for us to feel connected in fantasy than it is in reality.

Porn kills human connection.

And human connection is what relationship lives and dies by.

5. Porn is a professional liability.

Pornography is the master of preoccupation. According to recent polls, 18 percent of men who view porn regularly admit to be distracted by it even when not online, and 30 percent acknowledge that their work performance suffers because of this distraction.

In striking contrast, research also proves that across the board, men who have a healthy sex life make more money than those who don't.

You decide what's better.

6. Porn hurts your significant other.

It's easy to think that your porn habit is private, and doesn't affect anyone but you. Yet as we've already seen, porn inevitably kills a man's ability to emotionally connect and consistently monopolizes his desires.

Whether your wife knows you are using pornography or not, your actions have already hurt her.

Rabbi Arush puts it this way:

> *"A woman is not just a body, but a vibrant soul that thrives on intimacy, attention, communication, consideration, respect, and the love of two souls binding together. A husband that focuses on his own physical gratification doesn't provide his wife with any of the emotional and spiritual gratification that is the basis of her vitality."*

7. Porn will turn you into “that guy.”

You know “that guy.” Most crowds have at least one. He’s the one who cares about no one but himself. He sees you and all others as commodities to be used, not people to be cared for. No matter how much you can’t stand “that guy,” as long as you continue to dabble in porn, you run the risk of becoming him.

Gail Dines puts it bluntly in her book Pornland.

> *“In the story of porn, men are soulless, unfeeling, amoral life-support systems... who are entitled to use women in any way they want. These men demonstrate zero empathy, respect, or love for the women they have sex with.”*

No one wants to be “that guy.” What’s more, no one wants to be with “that guy” who only sees women as consumable objects and cares for no one but himself.

8. Porn will never actually do it for you.

“Just as Twinkies are artificially enhanced,” says the nonprofit team Fight the New Drug, “and modified food that really aren’t good for you, pornography is an artificially enhanced and modified sexual experience that isn’t good for you either, and your body knows it.”

Lust, in its nature, is never satisfied. It only wants more.

9. Porn will kill your relationship.

In the eight reasons above, we’ve looked to science, social studies, and history to witness the effects that pornography has on those who entertain it.

We've seen that it kills everything long- term love is built on: human connection, trust, and self-sacrifice. It's no wonder, then, that at least 56 percent of divorce cases today involve one party who compulsively visits pornographic websites.

Your marriage may survive your habit for a period of time. However, if you continue to choose fantasy over reality, it will inevitably destroy your ability to love your wife.

As modern men, we certainly have plenty of unnatural things to navigate to keep our marriages healthy and alive. However, my hope is that—with a vision of a marriage that is worth fighting for—we're more determined than ever to do just that.

DAY 11

3 Reasons Why You Can Celebrate Your Failures

By: Seth Taylor

Father Richard Rohr has a book called *Falling Upwards*, and I love that title. Why? Because it just flips the whole "failure" thing on its head.

"Failure" is a funny word. It seems to indicate that there is some standard that we are supposed to live up to, which in turn forces us to struggle with the acceptance of what is, right here, right now.

It creates a god that stands there waiting for us to be something we're not. In other words ...

The idea that we have "failed" forces us to suppress the truth.

If you look at porn, you didn't "fail"—instead, think of it like this: you looked at porn because some part of you *wanted* to.

So if you can accept that some part of you wants—and even feels it needs—porn, then you can ask a much more helpful question: why do I want this? Why do I need this?

So if you want to call that failing, then I think you should celebrate your failures.

This is what the mission of the cross was all about: “It is finished” – the system of this God standing over you has ended and you can now stand in your truth and ask the important questions, which ultimately leads the core human question: *what do you want?*

So, with that in mind, here are three reasons why you can celebrate your failures.

1) When we fail, it shows us that what we’re doing to get free, or what we believe about freedom, *isn’t true.* That’s the awesome thing: you are free to judge the truth of your spiritual beliefs and practices based on whether *they work or not.* If they aren’t bringing about transformation in your life, then it’s time to let them die….or at least be willing to look at them in a new light. Because you shouldn’t have to adopt some system of control and slap a “God” label on it.

If it’s real, it doesn’t have to be believed in; it can be experienced.

2) Where you are weak, God’s grace rises like a flood plain, covering you in a truth about the nature of God. Your failures exist only in your conscious and unconscious. The nature of God is that “nothing can separate you from the love of Christ.” Nothing. That’s the nature of God.

And how would you ever discover this if you didn’t have to occasionally look up from your pig-pen? I’m serious – we can actually find joy when we discover that any illusion that God ever disapproved of us or “hated” us was just that: an illusion/lie whispered in our ear by our ego and the nasty energies that feed it.

3) **Failure allows us to see that the world is a community of broken people.** And we can perhaps finally live at one with that community. Dietrich Bonheoffer wrote from his Nazi prison cell that “perhaps a Christian instinct is to live in the world as if God does not exist, at one with the suffering of the world.”

What he was getting at was that Jesus declared that the system of the gods ruling over our consciousness was “finished.”

We didn’t need to keep trying to please God.

God wasn’t pleased or displeased. God is love. GOD IS LOVE. Think about what that means for your failures.

Now you can look around you and find that there are a zillion people suffering like you….and there is something beautiful in the midst of that suffering. Can we embody that beauty as we seek transformation?

Now you can get some space to ask the real question: what do you want? That, my friend, is a path to walk, one step at a time. Blessings on that road where God is the beautiful ether surrounding us as we walk as opposed to some ghost haunting us.

See you on the road, where we can all celebrate our failures.

DAY 12

The Biggest Lie Women Believe

By: Alice Neaves

“I am alone. I am the only woman who struggles with porn”

There are many lies a woman will believe in her lifetime: that she is too fat or too bossy, that shoulder pads were a good idea, that her worth comes from her outward appearance, that she can’t lift heavy weights, that she needs to be married to be complete…the list goes on.

But by far **the most destructive lie a female porn addict can believe is that she struggles with a “guy’s issue.”**

She hears it from the pulpit at church, online, from her friends, in jokes, in books, and, most vehemently, from her own mind. Of course many of these voices are well-meaning in addressing men who struggle. It is good to get this conversation happening. However, when the conversation is skewed toward men, listeners forget that women are watching porn, too.

These words seep into a female porn addict’ mind, trapping her in the stigma of facing a ‘male issue’, and birthing a multitude of questions:

> *“Am I a man? Am I not feminine enough? How much testosterone **do** I have? Am I a lesbian? Should I just work in the sex industry? What’s wrong with me?”*

These questions lead to confusion. Only one thing is clear to the female porn addict—she is worthless, disgusting and alone.

This is a lie.

And this lie has a name. It's shame.

Shame takes the feeling of guilt for doing something morally questionable and attaches it to the self. It is no longer the activity that is "bad" but the individual herself.

Shame is guilt gone rogue.

It is a poison that burns you up from the inside.

And it becomes all you know.

Shame has a powerful grip on the mind of a woman addicted to porn. If she *is* the only woman struggling with this, she is out of the ordinary. Out of 7.4 billion humans, she happens to be the freak. The odd one out. She doesn't fit the feminine mold, so there must be something irredeemably wrong with her. Shame becomes her blanket. It is the only way of making sense of her experience.

So what's the cure? What is a female porn addict to do to break free from the lie?

She needs to know she is part of a global community of women who struggle with porn use. That community is a part of an even bigger circle of others who fight. **Porn addiction is not a gendered issue. It's a human issue.**

The stats speak for themselves. They clearly show more women are watching porn than ever before. One in three visitors to adult websites are women, and up to 17% of them consider themselves addicted.

Within the Church, countless women are fighting the shame that comes with struggling with a porn addiction. And let's not even get started on the sheer number of females hooked on habitual masturbation to the point of compulsion!

If these statistics feel too distant and unreal, let me assure you they are true. I am one of these women. I write this knowing full well the world of porn addiction. You, your wife, your congregation member, your loved one are not alone in this.

There's your cognitive information, *but what about the heart?* It can feel so infected, so dark and unlovable. Here's where a woman's sisters come in. She needs to tell someone. She needs accountability. She needs to connect with others who have struggled. (Yes, they're out there!)

Getting very real with a small handful of my closest girlfriends and setting up an accountability network was the push I needed to get through the hardest months of recovery. Knowing the hard questions would be asked but judgment wouldn't be leveled kept me from curling up into secrecy, shame, and old habits.

Groundbreaking vulnerability and shame researcher Brene' Brown claims empathy is the antidote to shame. She says, "If you put shame in a petri dish, it needs three things to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence, and judgment. If you put the same amount in a petri dish and douse it with empathy, it can't survive. The two most powerful words when we're in struggle: me too."

For the female porn addict, finding the right person to confess to can seem impossible. But it's worth it. On top of an 'on-the-ground' accountability partner, **Small Groups Online** are an incredible blessing. This is a safe place where your petri dish of shame can be flooded with empathy and hope. Groups are run for women, by women. Together, women can outnumber and drown out the lie that says, *"I am alone. I am the only woman struggling with porn."*

DAY 13

If You Are Looking For A Battle You'll Find One

By: Seth Taylor

When I was a porn addict, I attended a small group at my church. We confessed to each other and encouraged one another through prayer and counsel. I made some really close friends in that group.

There is something powerful about the ability to be truly vulnerable with another human being.

In our common struggle, we used a certain kind of language to speak about our struggles that hinted at our difficulties without always going into the grungy details. Much of this language was pulled from popular books at the time and from some passages in scripture, while much of it was simply what we felt.

One of the most common phrases we used was "*it's every man's battle*." It felt good to know we were not alone there in that tiny office. And it certainly *felt* like a battle, so we adopted a lot of warfare metaphors and terminology. In some of our gatherings, you might have thought you were in a VFW meeting.

What we perhaps didn't realize was that as we spoke that way, we reinforced a paradigm that we had adopted of our struggle. This paradigm dictated how we approached that struggle and infected the way we saw the world, our God, and ourselves. It did passive damage.

After many years of battle, I started to grow weary and began asking some important questions about this paradigm.

It seemed deeply unhelpful to climb deeper and deeper into a war that most people, including most pastors who spoke about the issue from the pulpit, told me could never be won – only fought. Over and over again, I heard that in Jesus we were free, but we will always struggle.

It was in the scriptures that I began to find a way home; back to myself and back to the Spirit that created my sexuality. There's a story in the New Testament: the Temple Guard was arresting Jesus shortly before he would be hung on a cross and executed. One of Jesus' disciples pulled a sword to defend his Master and Jesus called out to him: "*Peter! Put away your sword! For he who lives by the sword will die by it."*

And that's where it hit me: it was time for a new paradigm. I had been living and dying by the sword:

I'd been seeking battle, so that's what I'd always found.

I wondered what it would look like to seek peace. Would I find it?

Searching for a new paradigm, I turned to another treasured book in Christian lore: *Pilgrim's Progress.* In John Bunyan's classic allegory, he paints a picture of a man who has adopted his humanity not as something to be escaped or fought against, but rather as something that needed to be rechristened.

And so it was that **I came to see my addiction not as a battle but as a pilgrimage.** And in this paradigm, all that was required was the next step – a step that was blessed and covered in grace. And instead of finding my power in the sword I carried and in all of the control mechanisms I wielded against my enemies, I instead found *authority* – that mysterious ability to move mountains, heal and be healed, and cause demons to submit. No sword necessary.

Lacey Clark Ellman, author of *Pilgrim Principles: Journeying with Intention in Everyday Life*, says that a pilgrimage is a journey that has been infused with meaning and intention.

She claims this infusion makes a journey sacred, meaning the light of divine grace and power saturates it. So what if we borrowed that same thought, switched our paradigm, and blessed these addictions we carry as part of a sacred journey? What if we infused this addiction with the meaning of and the intention of redemption?

I believe we can discover real power when we adopt this paradigm. This has been my experience. So lay down your sword, join with other pilgrims on the path, and start walking one step at a time into an unknown that is infused with grace and mercy.

See you on the road.

DAY 14

“Why Can’t I Quit Porn?” Get to the Root

By: Eddie Capparucci

It is difficult watching men spend years struggling to get themselves free of pornography. They keep saying, ... Why can't I quit porn but seem to find no answers. I remember going through my own challenges erasing porn from my life and the feelings of frustration and hopelessness each time I had a setback.

Today, as a Christian counselor, I get the opportunity to walk with men as they take up the battle against pornography and it’s heartbreaking to hear their stories of endless attempts to get sober only to succumb to temptation over and over again.

“Why can’t I quit porn?” said Larry. “I have tried everything that has been asked of me in the past: Internet security, support groups, accountability partners… you name it and I’ve done it. And don’t get me wrong, they certainly help for a while, but it never fails as time goes on the same hurtful feelings start coming back and I find myself using once again. **Sometimes I feel like I have done nothing but put a band-aid over my sexual addiction.** It stops the acting out until it falls off.”

As Larry spoke, I knew right away what he was struggling with in his quest to be porn free. He had never gotten to the root of his sexual addiction problem.

At the heart of all addictions is emotional pain.

Addictive behaviors are used in an attempt to conceal the hurt we feel by serving as a distraction. And they do an excellent job keeping our emotional pain in check – for a brief time. But once the “high” of our addiction has worn off, we find ourselves right back where we started.

Now you may be saying to yourself, “I don’t feel any emotional pain. I use pornography simply because I like it.” This is not unusual. It tells me you have done an excellent job suppressing troubling emotions. In fact, you may have a difficult time in expressing any emotion beyond anger, happiness, or sadness. But lying at the core of you addiction is a rationale for why you abuse sex. Because that’s exactly what you’re doing – abusing sex.

The emotional pain that leads to sexual addictions can take on many different forms. Over the years I have identified numerous reasons men abuse sex, including: an overwhelming need for affirmation; a sense of entitlement; need for control; the hunger for attention; feelings of weakness; inability to emotionally engage; early sexual stimulation or abuse; and as a stress-buster. It is not uncommon for men to deal with two or more of these emotional troubles.

Behavior modification has its place in treating sexual addictions and is extremely valuable, but a key to freeing yourself from abusing sex is learning to identify and manage your emotional pain. And that requires getting to the root.

If you’re tired of asking yourself why can't I quit porn and wondering how to get to the root, XXXchurch suggests investigating My Pilgrimage, a comprehensive program designed to help you dig to the roots of your addiction —and then unearth them.

Check it out here.

DAY 15

Porn Isn't the Problem. So What Is?

By: Seth Taylor

Let's be clear about something – going to war with the porn industry and pretending that its existence is the source of all of our struggles with sexuality is silly. Porn Isn't the Problem. The porn industry exists because of a simple economic principle called *supply and demand.* We want it, so it's there.

We literally created the porn industry through our demand for it.

And those people can't figure out how to distribute their product fast enough because of that demand.

So protesting a porn show, like the dude in the video that Craig posted the other day, can become a way of unconsciously pacifying the internal guilt and shame we feel because we want something we're not supposed to want.

And this is a deep, deep, thing.

In the Scriptures, it says, "Judge and you will be judged. Condemn and you will be condemned." That's often read in a way that says, "Don't judge/condemn or God will get you." But I think it actually is more helpful to understand it as a way that human consciousness functions.

Think about it this way: what we experience externally is a mirror of what we are experiencing internally, in the darkest corners of our unconscious.

If we judge others, that judgment comes from an internal self-hatred.

I did this all the time. Growing up, I was taught to hate myself and my own pain and sin, so my view of the world and the beautiful souls in it was tainted. I saw them the way I saw myself.

That's why, when we begin to find internal health and healing, it leads to a deep love for ourselves, which in turn allows us to drop judgment of others (which is an incredible piece of the whole "freedom puzzle").

It frees us to make choices for our lives that aren't based on some law or prohibition (which brings death and just makes things suck royally), but rather based in true desire rooted in our spirits – which seeks God almost like a long-lost Lover.

So rather than looking at porn and saying, "I can't have that," we can look at it and say, "I can have that if I want it. So why do I want it so badly?"

And then we deal with the why.

No guilt, no shame. This type of freedom from "the law" is a far more helpful way to approach this issue.

And you'll discover through this process that the "problem" is infinitely more complex than some poisonous theology that demands you see yourself as a turd on the bottom of God's shoe. That paradigm of humanity is the problem – not you.

So, as I have said so many times before, we are free to ask the only real question: What do you want?

Because you can have whatever you want – seek it and you will find it if you seek it with all of your heart.

Blessings to everyone with the courage to lay down the sword, megaphone, and pamphlets for the sake of stepping onto the sacred road of Pilgrimage. See you on the road.

DAY 16

3 Things That Kept This Pastor On Porn

By: Tim Swanson

I can clearly remember the crushing weight of carrying my secret porn addiction onto the church stage each week. It felt like a million pounds on my chest. At times I wondered whether or not a person could die from stress. If so, I certainly felt like a candidate.

I would regularly commit to myself that this will be the last time, only to find myself feeling frustrated and defeated after 'acting out' again. I felt like I had tried everything.

I used X3watch. I tried avoiding the internet. I got "accountabili-buddies." I prayed, pleaded, and begged God to save me from myself. But no matter what I did, the problem only seemed to get worse.

My life went on like that for twelve frustrating years before I finally found a sponsor, a support group, and, eventually, my sobriety. Since then I've not only learned how to break the bonds of addiction in my life, I've also learned a lot about what I did that kept me living out destructive patterns over and over again.

If you're anything like me and you are still carrying around a secret that is killing you, watch out for these things. One or some of them could be why you're still struggling to find success.

1. Pride is chronic.

Everyone is prideful to some degree – no one is immune. It was pride that drove me to say things like, "If I could just…" or "All I need to do is…" But the truth is, I was powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing. And my life had become unmanageable. (If those last two sentences sound familiar, it's because they're two of the twelve steps in recovery.)

If you're struggling to conquer your sin, a prideful attitude may be what's standing in your way. In that case, the prescription is to work toward understanding that you're powerless. This can be tough for pastors and church leaders, because we're supposed to have all the answers, right? But even we are powerless against our addictions, and the sooner we accept that, the sooner we can get a handle on them.

2. A jacked-up view of God.

God is all powerful, right? Of course He is! I never had a problem believing that. I grew up going to church and was always completely familiar with God's power. My problem was that I didn't believe God wanted to help ME. I prayed fervently for God to remove my affliction. When He didn't seem to be doing so, I took it as evidence that He was done with me.

If that resonates with you, then you're experiencing shame.

Shame is the belief that, while others simply make mistakes, you ARE a mistake.

Breaking away from shame is no easy task, but it can be done. If you need a good place to begin, start with what the Bible says about you in 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:8; Romans 8:37-39.

3. It wasn't painful enough.

One time I called my sponsor after I had just relapsed. I whined about my defeat, and asked why I had failed. I'll never forget his response:

"Any living creature, in pain for long enough, will eventually do something about it. I know you're in pain, but maybe you're not in enough pain to do what is necessary for you to get better. It's not the end of the world. It just means you haven't hit your bottom yet. Don't worry you'll get there."

I did, and it hurt. But it finally hurt enough for me to do something about it.

Do you see any or all of these three things happening in your life?

Today can be the day of your redemption, the day you turn it around for good.

DAY 17

3 Lies Porn Taught Me About Sex

By: Tyler Ward

Sadly, most people—both men and women—don't know what sex is today.

It was a fall day in third grade. I jumped off the bus and abided by my normal routine of climbing my next-door neighbor's fence and knocking on the front door to join Jackson, my next door neighbor, in whatever nonsense he was getting into that day.

From the moment he opened the door, something about the wild in his eyes and the smirk on his face told me today was different. He anxiously invited me in, quietly shut the door behind me, and ran upstairs. I followed him to the back of the house where a storage closet opened up to a walk-in attic.

Apparently his mom wasn't aware of the dozen boxes of Playboys packed away when she asked Jackson to organize the attic that day. He wasn't sad about her ignorance, and neither were my preteen hormones. We spent the next sixty minutes skimming the magazines and creating misconceptions about sex that would take me years to understand.

My earliest sexual awakening was built on fantasizing about women who weren't actually real. These bad ideas about sex continued to be facilitated by the occasional exposure to pornography throughout my teenage years. And even though I never developed an addiction, my exposure was enough to keep me thoroughly misinformed about sex.

Most men have their own version of this story. According to recent statistics in 2013, **85% of men look at pornography at least once a month.** And part of the 85% or not, we've all likely been misinformed about sex by marketers and the media throughout our lives.

Pornography has lied to us about sex.

It elicits and perpetuates ideas about intimacy that are actually more about fantasy than they are about real sex. It has taken a gift given to us to cultivate a lasting relationship and turned it into an act of self-fulfillment. It has—both subtly and significantly—stolen from the meaning, beauty, and long-term benefits of sex for most men today.

Here are 3 lies porn taught me about sex.

1. Sex is conquest.

The woman on that computer screen requires nothing more than that you look at her. And though conquering her in your mind may somehow make you feel validated, there's nothing truly validating about it.

Sex is so much more than some physical conquest or achievement. It's designed to facilitate real, holistic connection—mind, body, and spirit. And though this artificial validation porn offers can be addictive, the holistic connection of real sex offers so much more than a momentary high.

> *"The complete physical and emotional proximity of sexual intercourse," says Mary Anne McPherson Oliver, "is the single most important factor in the creation of the couple's unity and deeply, irrevocably, and continually alters the people involved."*

It's no secret that if a man has any bit of explorer in him, it doesn't take long to experience every part of his wife's body.

And sure, sex with her may not always be as “new and exciting” as with digital companions—but it’s far more excitingly dynamic, far more beneficial in the long-term, and far more human than pixelated images can ever be.

2. Sex is an escape.

> *“Porn is not about sex,” Paula Hall, a sexual psychotherapist, says. “A man doesn’t need to look at pornography for six or seven hours if he just wants sexual gratification. It’s about escapism. It’s a secret world they can disappear into, as many addictions are.”*

On the contrary, **sex in marriage requires that we actually show up.** And not just with our bodies, but with our whole selves—physically, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically. Sadly, these artificial sexual experiences that seem to effortlessly remove us from our world of stress and uncertainty have been said to make real sex not feel worth the effort and vulnerability.

The truth is that artificial sex offers little more than a brief escape followed by a harsh return to the same stressful and uncertain reality.

In contrast, the effort and vulnerability involved in sex with your spouse is an investment with an incredible return. It offers holistic intimacy, rather than the emotional emptiness of porn. And while it is an effective stress-reliever, it also creates a long-term reality in your marriage and family that you likely won’t want to escape any time soon.

3. Sex is about an orgasm.

You offer nothing to that woman on the screen. She, on the other hand, offers you the chance to feel validated, to escape, and to indulge yourself with a few moments of pleasure. Therefore, your alleged experiences with her make the intentions of sex entirely about you and what you can get from her.

But real sex is designed with a different intention in mind.

Sex is scientifically proven to be one of the more effective cultivators of intimacy in marriage. As one expert puts it,

> *“There’s convincing evidence that oxytocin is involved in mediating stability, pair bonding, and monogamy; all the enduring parts of love.”*

What your spouse offers you are the true benefits of sex. And these benefits aren’t limited to the ecstasy of an orgasm—but include the physical, emotional, and spiritual connection that is cultivated with the person we get to wake up next to tomorrow morning.

It’s this enduring kind of love—real love, with a real woman—that’s worth abandoning fantasy for. And let’s make no mistake about it, you can’t have both.

DAY 18

Is Masturbation a Sexual Sin?

By: Paul Robinson

The ‘M’ word, Spanking the Monkey, Choking the Chicken, Bashing the Bishop, ***Buffin’*** the Bishop, Blowing Your Own Horn, Choking Kojak, Civil War (yeah, I’m not sure about that one either), Doing the Dew, Draining the Lizard, Flute Solo, Glazing the Donut, Han Solo (for all you pun-lovers), Jackin’ the Beanstalk, and finally, my personal favorite, Getting Tennis Elbow.

We tend to talk about masturbation without actually talking about it, but if we’re honest,

most of us have masturbated at some point.

Sometimes the reaction we get when we talk about it is the kind of reaction you would expect if you admitted kicking kittens in your spare time. So let’s start off like this, everyone poops, and pretty much all of us, at one time or another, have engaged in _____ (fill in your own personal preference from the list above).

There have been many ways we’ve talked about masturbation here at XXXchurch. In fact Levi wrote post about this topic earlier in the week. You can check that out here.

But the main question I always seems to hear is this:

Is masturbation a sin?

Usually a person asks this question from the context of their own personal private time; they're wondering whether it's okay to participate. The answer is usually something along the lines of, "*Well, the Bible doesn't expressly forbid masturbation, but it does speak pretty clearly on lust*." Which then raises the standard follow-up question: **is masturbation all right if your mind is completely blank and not focusing on anyone?**

Which then makes me wonder: just what ***are*** you thinking about?

These are not bad questions in and of themselves, yet they often leave us scratching our heads more than giving us a clear direction. So I would like to propose a few different ways we can think and talk about masturbation.

1. Masturbation Is Not the Worst Sin Ever

I'm neither condoning nor condemning masturbation but simply taking a step back and realizing that masturbating does not make you an evil person.

The truth is, conversations around masturbation and porn are so rare that in our minds we create this huge wall that we don't know how to deal with when it starts to crumble on us. We make it so huge that we don't want to talk about it, which allows our addictions to grow taller and thicker, all because we're led to believe it's weird and no one else does it. But they do. Which leads to…

2. Porn = Drugs; Masturbation = Bongs.

A lot of the time that anyone masturbates it is accompanied by porn. It's probably the easiest way to get aroused when you are on your own, and as such it is easy to become addicted to porn. When such a powerful force as porn goes along with masturbation, the hold porn has over us grows as well. **If porn is the drug we use to suppress pain, then masturbation is the bong.**

So a question better than "*Is masturbation a sin?*" might be, "*Is there something deeper going on that we are trying to use porn and masturbation to heal?*"

We can spend a lot of time doing our best to not look at porn or masturbate, and we might even be successful, but sooner or later, the question of why we use these things in the first place needs to be answered if true freedom is to be experienced.

3. Freedom Is Not Legalism

When we place masturbation in its correct context as something that can be potentially harmful but not something we need to be ashamed of or keep hidden from others, we can leave behind old ways of thinking about it that lead to nothing more than legalism for many.

Legalism tells us what we can't do but never goes into why we shouldn't.

You just don't do it and don't ask any questions, and if you get caught you better believe we'll make you feel horrible for it. And guess what that leads to?

Grace, on the other hand, asks deeper questions. It asks what you are searching for; it listens to your experiences as a person with the purpose of better understanding who you are; it makes you feel secure and free to go to the deepest parts of yourself, not afraid of the dark because it is no match for the light; it doesn't control; and most of all, it seeks to give us freedom from those things which slowly choke us and keep us imprisoned.

When we talk so much about sin in a way that builds lust and masturbation into these huge monsters that are growling constantly, we seek to control them by placing them in cages.

But we don't address the real issues, and so continue to feed them until they grow too big for their cages and finally break out, creating more damage than ever before.

When this happens, it may be time to think a little about how we talk about masturbation and everything that comes with it. Because some of our old ways are not helping anyone.

Least of all Kojak.

DAY 19

How Do I Stop Masturbating?

By: Will Hathaway

The struggle with masturbation and porn is that these are addictions that often grow in secret and are fueled by shame. The normal tendency for people is to also try to conquer their addictions in secret so that nobody ever knows there was a problem there to begin with. Thus giving victory over what they know is a problem but saving them the embarrassment of anyone ever knowing. Frustration mounts as the tactic is often to plead with God to take away these desires and when He doesn't, the spiral continues.

The fact is, in order to beat any addiction, the question must eventually be asked,

> *"Do I want victory more than I want to not be embarrassed?"*

If saving face is the most important thing in your life, then victory will be very difficult to attain. I'm not sure it is fair of us to ask God to take away sexual desires since He is the one who gave them to us to in the first place. Sex like fire is good in the right situation, but also like fire, when taken out of the proper setting can destroy everything in your life, including your family.

The question now becomes, in my heart of hearts, how badly do I want to stop engaging in unhealthy and destructive activities?

When we want it enough, we will begin to take the steps we need to take to win. We will confide in that friend, we will talk to that pastor, we will seek out that counselor, we will set up the roadblocks. It is almost impossible to set up roadblocks that we can't get past if we really want to get past them.

Road blocks aren't there to keep us from what we want, they are there to keep us from what we don't want. If I really don't want something like masturbation to rule an area of my life, then I will set up the needed barriers in my particular life that will help me to succeed. If we set up barriers that we know ahead of time that we are going to try to get around then we are simply kidding ourselves and playing games with not only God but ourselves as well.

Interestingly, sexual addictions like many other addictions tend to be very affected by stress.

The more stress in our lives the more we tend to turn to these things to escape reality. One of my favorite activities is backpacking. I find that when I'm out in nature away from cell signal and the stresses of the world that I have very little problem with almost all of my bad habits.

I would encourage you that as you battle whatever issues haunt you that you also lean very strongly on those good and healthy activities in your life that relieve stress for you. Also remember that when it comes to sexual issues, 70 to 80 percent of all men can relate to your struggle. We are all in this together so you're not alone, even when you feel you are. Let's do this!

DAY 20

Is Masturbation Helping Me Stay Pure?

By: Levi the Poet

I remember the first time my dad told me about porn and masturbation. We took a “man’s trip” over the weekend and did “manly” things like fire-building and four-wheeling. We listened through Dr. James Dobson’s *Preparing For Adolescence* and I learned not to look at pornography and (probably) not to masturbate.

So of course I went home and did both of those things.

I say “probably” about masturbation because Dobson didn’t seem to take much issue with it, so I spent a decent amount of my time trying to reconcile the guilt that came after the comedown with the hope that he was right – *maybe God didn’t take much issue with it, either.*

I’ve put a good amount of thought into what I might say about masturbation here, and though I’d rather write up an academic theology on it,

1) I’ve never really understood how people have done that anyway *(no, Onan’s sin was not jacking off)*, and

2) I know that motive, and it’s self-protection.

So this isn’t going to be a blog about neural pathways and brain-training, although Carl Thomas wrote a little bit about that, and I believe it’s helpful to understand.

Is masturbation helping me stay pure?

Here, right or wrong, I've got some personal wrestlings, and in an effort toward exemplifying the vulnerability that we always encourage, I have some confessions:

1) I've swung to both sides of the pendulum.

I have lived through seasons of my struggle believing that masturbation was undeniably wrong. It was almost always coupled with pornography or fantasy, and the depth of condemnation that came from my addiction threatened to crush me. Like it was the opposite of helping maintain or promote purity.

I've also swung to the opposite end of the spectrum where pornography was not present, and I believed that I was able to masturbate lust-free, where sexual fantasy did not intrude, and I was not guilt-ridden by it. That maybe it was helping me stay pure, or could be, in and of itself.

2) I've gone back and forth on what I believe about masturbation… even while working with XXXChurch.

I'm not comfortable writing this, to be honest. I'm about as terrified as I was whenever I'd do a Q&A with Craig and Jeff on our Porn Kills Tour and hope the inevitable M-Word question would get passed off to someone else. Was I willing to tell someone that the act of masturbation is inherently wrong? What if I believed someone when they told me that they could masturbate with a clear mind? But even if they could, would it qualify as "purity?" And was this a God-fearing internal wrestling, or my subversive drifting toward a sinful position that would better suit my wants and whims?

3) I don't have years of masturbation-sobriety under my belt.

I'm writing this as a man who has advocated for transparency while not always being entirely transparent.

As a man with a deep theology of community and not always in it. As a married man who has not always been entirely faithful, at least in regard to the places my mind has gone, and the directions my eyes have lingered.

Recognizing the hypocrisy above, and having established that masturbation involving pornography, lust-driven fantasy, and addiction is opposed to God's design for purity, I will say that as a married man, I think there are times when masturbation focused toward your spouse is mutually permissible and, perhaps, can prove pure.

For example: perhaps a spouse travels for work and technologies like, say, the telephone, picture message, or FaceTime/Skype, would allow couples the opportunity for sexual intimacy that – while not intercourse – is consensual and "together," though technically masturbatory.

I travel. There have been instances in which temptation has come, and rather than giving into those lusts, I have had the opportunity to redirect them towards my wife and involve her in an act that deals with those desires in a way that is open and which serves the purpose of maintaining my purity. That keeps me from looking at other women, from keeping secrets from her. Having excluded the clear contradictions above, this is one way in which masturbation has been helpful.

The fear in saying that, obviously, is creating opportunity for license in different circumstances, and in those whose convictions do not allow for the same. I would say that the vast majority of what we talk about when we talk about masturbation is accompanied by what is clearly impure. I would even say that the majority of my experiences with masturbation have been impure.

But am I willing to say that masturbation is, definitively, only, always and forever wrong?

I still don't know. Let the conversation continue.

DAY 21

10 Steps to Go a Year Free of Porn and Masturbation

By: XXXchurch Team

Look, we're no dummies around here. We know a lot of you have made promises to yourself to steer clear of porn and masturbation. And we encourage that! But we also know that many times these well-intentioned promises rarely get accomplished, at least not without a strategy.

So we did something new: we asked all our contributors and writing team to give you their best strategies for keeping your hands to yourselves. Here they are, in no particular order:

1) Prepare for discomfort.

Let's be honest, if you're going to learn to live without porn and masturbation, you're going to experience discomfort on many levels. Some people are so addicted that experiencing sobriety leads to withdrawal symptoms (like depression, irritability, etc). If this happens, it will be especially important to press through the pain. God will provide much-needed strength as you learn to persevere through the trial and temptations ahead. (Forest Benedict)

2) Practice self-forgiveness.

Many people can receive God's forgiveness but are unable to forgive themselves. Feelings of shame and self-criticism can surface constantly for those addicted to porn, and many people think that beating themselves up will lead to change.

Ironically, the truth is that self-criticism and shame play key roles in perpetuating addiction. Thus, learning to relate to yourself with the kind of grace that God extends to you will contribute to a victorious year.

Forgive yourself for past choices and when you go astray next time, and then forgive yourself again. Then get back up ASAP and keep moving forward. (Forest Benedict)

3) Don't trust willpower.

Will power always fails eventually. Trust the tools and people in your life to keep you accountable. (Dave Willis)

4) Find at least one person who you can trust with everything.

It feels so natural to hide our struggles in order to appear like we have it all together. As long as your junk stays hidden though, it will fester. It will continue to control and torment you until you deal with it. Luckily, God has given us a plan for bringing that junk into the light: “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed (James 5:16).”

It’s a simple plan, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy. Be courageous though. Find at least one person who you can share your junk with so that nothing in your life remains hidden. Dig it up, talk about it, pray about it, and bless on another as you share your victories together. (Stephen Kuhn)

5) Keep stats.

Take note of the times when you're tempted to watch porn the most. Is it when you're stressed? Is it when you feel insecure? Is it when you're bored? Knowing your "triggers" can reveal a lot about the root of your interest/addiction. It can also help you to figure out what you should do in place of porn. Stressed? Exercise. Insecure? Pamper yourself. Bored? Watch an appropriate movie. (Shellie R. Warren)

6) Understand what "Fleeing" really looks like today.

If porn and masturbation are a temptation for you, avoid porn gateways. Let's be real: who can watch a two-minute soft-porn sex scene in Game of Thrones without lusting? If sexual temptation is your struggle, then don't play dumb and go see 50 Shades of Grey. In fact, take a realistic peek at the times you've failed in the past and retrace your step to locate lusting gateways and "triggers." The apostle Paul didn't say, "be a little bit careful" of these things... he said "RUN AWAY!!!" (Jonathan McKee)

7) Recognize your God-given nature.

Embrace, accept, and celebrate the fact that God has created us as sexual beings and that the desires that come with this aspect of ourselves are to be honored. Honoring our desires does not mean denying them (that is a form of dishonor). Rather, honoring our sexual desires means lining them up with God's intent for them – to draw us into committed, loving relationships with God, with others, and even within ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). (Randall Ajimine)

8) Start asking the right questions.

When you feel tempted, locate that temptation within your body and ask yourself, "What am I medicating?" The truth is that "acting out" isn't the problem – it's the medication for the real problem.

Let this year be the year where you plunge below the surface, shed the guilt and shame, and start asking the deeper questions about yourself. (Seth Taylor)

9) Change your outlook.

Stop dwelling on the negatives and start focusing on the positives. What’s good in your life? What could be even better? Then ask yourself how porn use or masturbation is limiting you in these areas.

Stop making it so much about why you need to stop these negative things and more about why you want to increase these positive things. Envision a better life and then go for it. Knock down those things that are stopping you from the full realization of what life has to offer by taking advantage of the tools and resources you have available to you. (Carl Thomas)

10) Do it one day at a time.

Any lifestyle change begins with a daily commitment to live differently. Don't focus on having to abstain forever. Focus on living today free from porn. You can do it. Then, you can wake up tomorrow and do it again. One day at a time you will overcome. (Dave Willis)

DAY 22

Will I Die If I Don't Masturbate?

By: Paul Robinson

Yes, you will. You'll also die if you do.

Next question?

Alright, I don't think that's what you mean when you ask this question.

There are two main themes that come up when people ask questions about masturbation.

Is it a sin and is it possible to survive without it?

If someone asks me about whether masturbation is a sin I usually answer like this: Why does it matter if it is or not? If it is, are you going to be able to stop doing it? If it's not, then what's the problem?

Saying that masturbation is a sin does no good in getting you to break free. You're going to do it one way or another.

Usually when we get past the legality or morality of masturbating we can get to the crux of the matter.

People don't usually care about whether masturbation is a sin, they just want someone to tell them whether they can do it or not.

Go for it I say. If it's the shame you're afraid of then let go of it. Just don't feel it. Loosen your grip. How useful has shame been in breaking free? I bet it hasn't helped at all. Is it the physical act of masturbating that you feel so bad about or is it the fact that you think you're not meant to do it?

Believe me, if you make a decision to just say no I'm not going to feel like crap about this anymore or I'm not going to mentally beat myself up, you'll feel much more peace. You'll be able to simply dismiss triggers without believing you have any choice.

But you won't die. Either way.

That response though can usually get an angry response. Even from the people asking it.

Listen, I'm not suggesting that it's good one way or another but you don't need to keep asking the question. Do you feel free? Does it help you be more present? Are you more attuned to God, your community, and yourself? If it makes you feel like garbage, then that's what you really need to know. Not whether it's technically a sin. Also, before anyone goes there, I'm not saying the opposite is true either. That anything that we do that feels good, must therefore be healthy.

So what's the alternative?

Maybe it's actually realizing that there are bigger issues at hand and we need to get over ourselves a little. I'm not belittling porn and masturbation addiction. It is a huge problem. Especially in the church. I spent more than my fair share of late-night porn and masturbation binges contributing to the statistics. I also help guys work through the reasons they feel they need it everyday.

But the reason it is a massive problem in the church is not because it is "right" or "wrong." It's because we place so much shame on it as if it's the worst thing you could ever do.

That's why it's a problem.

That’s why marriages fall apart. There is no openness about this stuff. We’ve been told that if we look at porn and masturbate we are evil or committing adultery or promoting trafficking.

Geez. No wonder no one wants to own up to it. Why would you?

Porn and masturbation are not the problem. You are.

Or rather the pain that you are carrying in which you think porn and masturbation will successfully medicate is. If we can learn to quit calling it simply a sin and really deal with our wounds in a healthy and honest way, then porn and masturbation will gradually start to lose their strength.

You don’t really want to know whether you will die without masturbation! You want permission to do it.

So go ahead. Or don't masturbate ... your choice.

Also, quit asking if masturbation is a sin. It doesn’t matter.

Guilt does not work. Courage and curiosity to seek out why we desire it will.

Let’s start asking those questions.

DAY 23

Four Deceptively Simple Ways To Rebuild Broken Trust

By: Seth Taylor

We can't change each other; we can only change ourselves.

That's just one of the hard and fast truths about relationships, and yet we tend to spend tremendous amounts of time and energy ignoring it.

Hey, I get it: sometimes that person *really needs to change*. But guess what: *we all need to change.* We always need to grow to places where we experience more peace, love, joy, freedom, and wisdom, whether we're the porn addict or the partner.

In that light, here are a few steps to take toward rebuilding the broken trust that often accompanies addiction. And please note: these steps are for *both* the people in the relationship, not just the porn addict.

1) Forgive everyone, including yourself.

First off: forgiveness is NOT a thing you do—it's a destination you arrive at within yourself. Between where you stand right now and that beautiful place where your eyes are opened and you see your partner in the light of grace, brokenness and all, you may find anger (rage, perhaps), repressed pain/trauma, and conflicting beliefs that may need to be shattered on your way to *forgiveness.* Don't know how to get there? Find a professional counselor who can sit with you and guide you through the process. It's time for action.

2) Find silence.

The ancient Christian mystics and desert fathers made lifestyles of living in silence—they lived tangibly from their spirits, understanding that the mind *is not* the spirit. The apostle Paul referred to a "peace that passes understanding." What does this mean for our busy world now? Oftentimes when we make a practice of the teaching, "be still and know that I am God," we can find in that space the patience, wisdom, insight, and kindness we need to see our partners as God sees them.

3) Get a mentor.

By this, I don't mean find someone who will teach you more of the same thing that hasn't been working for you.

Find someone who lives on the other side of the mountain you are climbing.

Find someone who has lived a story of pain and struggle and now *trusts their partner.* Do anything and everything you have to do to sit at their feet and learn. This is the ancient art of *discipleship,* and it is the most tangible form of true human community.

4) Commit to a lifetime of honesty.

You don't need to know every thought in your partner's head at all times, but being granted access to the innermost parts of ourselves is the core of trust. It's also the core of our pain, which makes it is so much harder to say than to do.

Allowing my wife to see me in all of my pain means I have to allow her to have *her* pain. Even if I cause it. And the same goes for her.

When I am this honest, I commit not to life that she can trust, but to a life where I become the person I want to be. I am making a commitment to myself.

My wife and I once stood on the sidewalk just after a joint counseling and committed to each other that we would go after our own individual healing with everything we had, desperate to try out the theory that this would lead to the marriage we wanted. And this is turning out to be true. We stopped *trying* to trust each other and learned to heal, and now we're discovering that ...

a healed person is very trustworthy.

Try out these four practices and you may find healing; and in healing, you'll slowly but surely rebuild trust.

DAY 24

6 Boundaries to Keep Your Desires in Check

By: Biz Gainey

This will be a hard article for most people to read. We often would rather live a lie than be open and honest with ourselves and loved ones. Below is a list of 6 characteristics of an "Open" person, if you are lacking them, you might be living a lie.

We live in an “I think therefore I am” kind of world, though personally, I resonate with what James K. A. Smith wrote: “*I love therefore I am*.” At any rate, here is what I know: personally I am driven (sometimes maddeningly so) by my desires.

Yes, I live from the heart.

This reality is captured in phrases like, “give me your heart,” or “you stole my heart,” or “my heart skipped a beat when I saw you.” You get the picture. Even the headiest among us can admit it would be kind of weird to attempt to win someone’s affections with an award-winning line such as, “Wow, you are so beautiful. I hope to steal your brain some day and make you mine.”

See what I mean? Just doesn’t work.

We are creatures of desire, but often our desires are dark and convoluted. As such, they quickly take us in the wrong direction; to the wrong places.

In other words ...

desire itself isn't wrong – it just gets misdirected toward destructive ends.

For instance, it's normal for us to desire to love and be loved. The problem occurs when we follow our desire to be loved into the world of false love such as pornography. The answer is not to run from desire and pretend it is something bad, but to seek ways to direct desire using boundaries that are protective and full of hope.

A good analogy might be to compare desires with the waters of a flowing river. Much like a river needs the boundaries of its embankment, so my desires need their own embankment to help them flow smoothly through life. But what happens when a river exceeds and goes past its boundaries? We call that a flood. The same is true of my desires. When they exceed boundaries, they cause flood-like damage and destruction.

Below are some boundaries I have spent years forming. When respected, these boundaries protect, direct, shape and honor my desires.

1. Accountability. Simply put, I am completely accountable to my wife and closest friends with my media usage and my social calendar.

2. Accepting responsibility for my actions. When I do fall down, I do not resort to blaming other people or circumstances. This boundary prevents me from playing the role of 'victim.'

3. Authenticity in my relationships. I strive to be truthful and honest in all my relationships. Lying is a root of destruction that I simply cannot allow to grow.

4. Awareness of my emotions. I routinely assess how I am feeling, because one of my triggers is loneliness and lack of intimacy. Being aware of this helps me assess my feelings and take appropriate actions to prevent any emotional flooding.

5. Acknowledge my need for others. Functionally speaking, this means that I am a part of groups that are committed to similar boundaries and walking together on a weekly, or sometimes daily, basis.

6. Admitting my own weakness. I do have real weaknesses; for me to pretend that I don't is a sure sign that I am heading for a fall. Admitting and knowing my 'weak spots' keeps me alert and engaged.

These boundaries represent years of success and failure, joy and pain. Many, if not all, are transferable to other situations. I hope they encourage you to establish some boundaries of your own as you take your own journey out of porn!

DAY 25

How To Deal With Loneliness And Shame

By: Paul Robinson

In church and Christian culture, there are times when we are told that we do not have to be perfect to be loved or accepted, but let's be honest—we rarely act like this is true.

There is a real danger of becoming overpowered by fear. Whether it's fear of not loving God enough, going to hell, or getting our theology wrong, many us have lived in fear of failure rather than the joy of freedom.

Sin is a prime example of this. We're told we're free from the power of sin and death, yet it's the one thing that many are frightened of the most. For us porn addicts, it can be a daily cause of anxiety and tension in our lives:

> *Will I give in today? Will I be able to resist the triggers that I face? Will I have to go to my accountability group and confess everything? What will their reaction be? Will I ever be able to stop?*

And the cause and effect of all of this both lie in the same thing: shame.

Shame causes us to try and feel better about ourselves by looking at porn; looking at porn causes us to feel deep shame. Round and round we go. Paralyzed by shame. Isolating ourselves more and more because we don't want to face the shame of being labeled a failure. Either by ourselves or others.

Ask anyone how they perceive someone who feels shame but yet is vulnerable enough to reach out and seek the help they need and we lift them up as brave and courageous and a great example.

But put ourselves in the same position of being vulnerable with others and we can revert to our old feelings of unworthiness, failure and consequently, shame.

I was brought up like many in a tradition that said I could never be perfect yet demanded that I leave church every Sunday with my halo, squeaky clean, and sitting nicely.

I was taught that all have sinned and fallen short, yet I did my utmost to prevent others from seeing the real me. The me I was too ashamed to have brought into the light.

I was taught that nothing I did could ever change God's love for me, yet I acted as if every time I looked at porn, that God was ready to give up on me.

This is shame at work at its most efficient. Shame stops us.

Shame knocks us down and says, "Where do you think you're going? Not so fast!"

The temptation is to remove shame as quickly and as painless as possible. Shame's only purpose is to lie and tell us in which areas of our lives we believe we are unworthy or unlovable, but Brene Brown, the shame researcher and writer, says you answer shame by dancing with it.

I think she is onto something.

The answer lies not in denying shame or ignoring it but looking it in the eye and reminding it and ourselves that we are loved and we are enough and nothing we've done up until this point is enough to write ourselves off.

Shame drives us to be so worried and terrified of failure.

It tells us that failure is final and devastating. But failure is sometimes necessary. Failure is not a good enough reason to hide away. We need to stop believing the lie that it is, because you are not a bad person when you fail. Failure merely means you are alive. Which, if you didn't know, is a good thing.

Giving in to porn, losing your sobriety, falling off the wagon—these are never the end.

How useful shame has been to your recovery so far? I'm guessing not so much. I'm guessing that beating yourself up over and over again only accentuates the shame. I'm guessing that it only causes you to cover your face.

What if tomorrow, when you wake up, you aren't afraid of failing or losing your sobriety? What if you're not afraid because for the first time you understand that if you do, you are still in the game, still in the fight, still cherished, still loved, and still accepted?

This means that in those times that you do look at porn your whole identity hasn't come crashing down around you because you know that **your identity is based on something that shame cannot touch: God's love for you.**

And when you're not ashamed of who you are, you won't hide or try and only allow the nice parts about you be seen. You will stand a little taller and a little more confident.

We'll see you. Failures and all. We don't care as much as you think we will. We still love you. We still believe in you and we'll continue to do so.

Stand up. It's time to start dancing.

DAY 26

The Only Thing That Still Surprises Me

By: Craig Gross

I'm not surprised that Jared was arrested for child pornography and pled guilty.

I'm not surprised that Josh Duggar had an Ashley Madison account. I'm also not surprised that his admission of that only came after it was exposed online, and that it included a plea for prayer for his wife and family.

I'm not surprised that a married Michigan state representative named Todd Courser had an affair with another married Michigan state representative named Cindy Gamrat. I'm not even surprised that he tried to divert attention from that affair by creating an email campaign suggesting he hired a male prostitute instead.

I'm definitely not surprised that neither Courser nor Gamrat have resigned from their positions in the Michigan state legislature.

I've been watching this kind of news break for years, and it's stopped shocking me.

Tiger Woods having tons of mistresses? *Not shocked.*

Anthony Weiner sending photos of his junk out to women? *Not shocked.*

Ted Haggard getting caught in a drugs-and-prostitution scandal? *Not shocked.*

No, none of this stuff surprises me anymore. You know what does?

The person who does the right thing.

The husband and wife who are faithful to one another; who celebrate their 25th, 35th, 50th, 75th wedding anniversaries.

The leader who stays off TMZ and the Huffington Post because they live a happy, satisfied life.

The pastor who is actually exactly the person they say they are, who isn't some back-door deviant or disgusting subreddit creeper.

That stuff is surprising.

I know I'm considered a leader, and as one who speaks out against the seedier aspects of our culture, I know I'm a target for a lot of people. I don't ever want to become clickbait for Gawker because of some scandal, which is why I try my hardest to live my life out in the open. I have several layers of accountability in place to make sure that I don't wind up as some website's shocking headline.

After appearing for my 2nd time on a major network news show, I had become friends with the host. He not only shared our message with millions of people, he personally vouched for me and our ministry. I considered him a friend and the night the program aired I called him and said thanks again. He then said something to me that I'll never forget:

> *"If I ever catch you with your pants down or cheating on you wife I will come to your house, cut your balls off, hang them on a tree, and light them on fire. Goodnight."*

I'm pretty sure he was only partly joking.

And that’s the kind of accountability we all need.

> We all need people in our lives who care enough about us to say things that might just scare us a bit.

What about you?

Have you taken the steps you need to take to stay off the gossip sites? Are you doing the work you need to do in your relationships to stay satisfied and to be satisfying?

Are you living the kind of open, fulfilled life you should be?

Go ahead. Surprise me.

DAY 27

5 Ways to Build Integrity

By: Carey Nieuhwhof

One thing I find in short supply at times is, unfortunately, integrity. I think that's part of the reason we value it so much when we find someone who actually displays it.

It's a breath of fresh air.

However, it's one thing to know you might lack integrity in certain areas (like your sex life), but something else entirely to learn how to develop it.

Integrity is about more than just doing the right thing.

It's about building the kind of character that can survive a crisis intact. In the same way that a building with integrity can survive a storm, a life that has integrity can do the same.

So how do you build integrity?

1. Be ruthlessly honest with yourself.

Of all the lies we tell, the ones we tell ourselves are the most deadly. Question your motives. Stop justifying what you know to be wrong. Stop excusing yourself. For example, if you click a link with a picture of a beautiful woman, ask yourself, "Did I really want to read that article that badly, or was it just an excuse to get an extra helping of eye candy into my diet?"

2. Seek wise counsel.

We all have blind spots. It's one thing to be honest with yourself, but sometimes we are simply blind to faults others can see. Find three or four people who believe in you and ask them for feedback on your life.

3. Decide to honor God, not please people.

Doing the right thing is not always easy, and sometimes it's not the popular thing. Honoring God is not the same as believing you are always right and everyone else is wrong – it simply means you are going to live with a long view of what to do, informed by scripture. It means enduring short-term pain for longer-term gain. To avoid becoming arrogant or deluded, make sure you test what obedience looks like for you, not only against scripture and prayer, but also with your circle of wise counsel (see point #2). They will see things you can't see.

4. Be appropriately transparent.

We'd all like to be something we're not. Admit your shortcomings.

Part of being honest with yourself is being honest with and accountable to others. And as much as you might be afraid that everyone will think less of you, living transparently and not pretending to be someone you aren't actually makes people think more of you. It's counter-intuitive. It's also transformative.

5. Put yourself first when it comes to personal growth.

I know that sounds selfish, even unbibilical, but I'm not sure it is. Jesus prepared for thirty years before ministering for three. And during those three years, he often disappeared to pray. You can only give from what you've received, and he spent whole seasons of his life receiving from God what he needed to give to the world. Cancel some appointments. Get up earlier. You need to build a solid spiritual, emotional and relational foundation for your life. Pray. Open the Bible (for you – not for anyone else, pastors). Go for a run.

Eat something healthy. Go for dinner with a friend who gives you life. If your cup is empty, how are you going to fill anyone else's?

These are five practices I've found helpful in my life.

What have you discovered that helps you build integrity?

DAY 28

3 Ways To Stop Looking At Porn At Night

By: Paul Robinson

When I first start coaching a guy here at XXXchurch, one of the first things I ask them is when and where they look at porn the most, thinking that a lot of them are looking at porn at night. There are numerous answers, but one of the most popular is indeed: “I find myself looking at porn at night, in my room, when everyone else has gone to sleep.”

Most of the time porn is viewed in isolation, when we don’t want anyone to find out about it. Looking at porn at night, then, provides the perfect cover because it is then when we are most likely to be alone.

It’s not easy to become free from a porn addiction. It might actually be the most difficult thing you ever do, and sometimes it requires taking your current lifestyle and deconstructing it so you can see where and when you are most vulnerable. So that’s exactly what we are going to do.

Please note: these 3 simple tips alone are not going to be enough for you to break free. Freedom may also require some deep searching into your very identity to see why you medicate with porn. It may mean dredging up deep wounds that you’ve suppressed for years.

But we’ve got to start somewhere, and this may be as a good as place as any. So, here are three ways to stop looking at porn at night.

1. Go to bed earlier

This probably sounds very obvious but cutting short the amount of time you have available to view porn in the evening is going to help a lot. Going to bed earlier, and then reading or listening to a podcast while you gradually fall asleep can be a great way not only to distract you but also to give you something other than porn to focus on.

Not only that, but since boredom and tiredness are massive triggers for many, getting an extra few winks will help you think more clearly and ward off some of the porn-induced tiredness we all know and hate.

2. Turn off internet devices

We all know that porn is more easily accessible now than ever before. You have a smartphone? You own porn! Which is why shutting off your device that you spend so much time on will help you greatly. I even started to leave my phone and computer downstairs in my basement because I knew that, as much as I love getting up at 3:00 in the morning, I'm less likely to go all the way down there to get them if I get in the mood to start looking at porn at night.

Being online late at night also keeps your mind racing, which can lead to exhaustion, an inability to de-stress after the day, and medicating all that busy-ness with something, even if it's not porn.

But this is about more than just our connected devices; it's about reconnecting to ourselves and our Spirit, and blocking out the noise that seeps into our thoughts. Have you tried to just sit and be quiet, listening to your breath? It's really difficult. Yet, when you learn to be comfortable with the quiet, you will find a piece of you waiting to reconnect with God, yourself, and others.

3. Finding community

Now that we've established that looking at porn at night—and even just being online at night—can effect our spirits and our physical bodies, what can we do instead?

Well, instead of searching for the connection we all demand and desire as humans on social media or online, how about we look up and find it in the people around us? Whether it's family or friends, what would it look like if we reconnected with those around us before traveling to the land of Nod?

Maybe it means catching up with your wife and opening up about how your day has been. Or maybe it's heading outside to meet with friends for a drink or coffee. Play a board game, go for a walk, take some time to play with your kids, ask someone out on a date. Whatever it means, late at night, for you to connect with other humans instead of their online alter egos, do it.

Gradually you'll find yourself not needing the false sense of being known by porn.

At the end of the day, quite literally, **porn is not going to help us find peace**, even if we've had a stressful day or can't stand the deafening silence of being alone.

But taking time to disconnect or reconnect with other people may just be the place we need to start to find a wholeness that we all crave.

DAY 29

3 Ways to Prepare Your Significant Other for the Truth

By: Seth Taylor

If you're a Christian of a certain brand, you may have been told when you got married that your body "belonged" to your spouse. In my upbringing, I was taught that our bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit and that, when I got married, my wife in some way now owned my body. And I owned hers. So when she found out I was looking at pornography, she understandably felt like something had been stolen from her.

In this experience, we were forced to face the hard truth that we had made some promises to each other with very little maturity and understanding of the complexity we each embodied. When she found out about my porn addiction, all that really happened was that she finally saw that my body was never hers… nor was it mine.

In actuality, my body had been co-opted long ago by pain, heartbreak, emotional abandonment, and a god of my creation that hated my guts. While I was an addict, my body like a zombie: not living, but not really dead. So I lived in this semi-conscious state, moving towards whatever I had to have to keep on surviving, while never actually thriving. This is what addiction is.

It is my belief that an honest conversation with our partners is a vital and important step into the actual death that is necessary within each person if they are going to step into the sacred journey that is the pilgrimage to health and healing. So – here are 3 ways to prepare your significant other for you the truth to confess your porn addiction:

1. Have the conversation with a trusted friend first. And I mean TRUSTED.

That means there is no judgment or need to call you out. Find someone who will simply listen and tell you their experience of you. Advice can be helpful, but not necessary. You just need some space to let your voice be heard.

2. Have the conversation inside of yourself.

Find some quiet and isolation (your car works great for this) and run the conversation in your mind. Feel your internal experience as you do this. See the face of your partner. Speak whatever comes up, even if it doesn't seem rational.

If you find yourself wanting to rage on them instead of confessing your sins, allow for that. Determine that you are not going to suppress your feelings or truth anymore, no matter how ugly.

When you are done with this process, you might find that you have come to peace with the truth about your relationship and perhaps you can finally be honest.

3. Have the conversation with God.

This can be complicated because the god you might be carrying with you could be part of the problem. The goal is to get past the god of judgment, fear, and condemnation and experience God: The One who knew you before you were conceived, who loved you there and has loved you that way ever since.

You may have a god of a different sort residing within you because of the way you were raised or experiences you've had that turned your ideas about this god into a toxic cocktail of mom/dad/church/pastor. That god cannot be trusted – and **you may need to speak to that god first and ask it why it hates you so much**.

When that has happened, I'd be willing to bet that you'll find a presence on the other side waiting to reveal Itself to you.

And **when God becomes real, speaking truth becomes easier because Grace comes to live within us**, driving the shame and the guilt back into the shadows.

Blessings on those who choose to step into the light. May it reveal the shadows within you and give you the courage to find your voice and step onto the sacred path of transformation.

DAY 30

3 Reasons Why Porn Hurts Your Spouse's Self-Esteem

By: Melissa Ruff

Pornography addiction doesn't just affect the person who uses porn. It creates a vacuum that sucks the life out of everyone surrounding it. When my husband was looking at porn regularly, he thought that it had no effect on me. I'm sure that is a common thought process, but boy, is it wrong. Porn hurts your spouse's self-esteem; in fact, his pornography addiction led to the downfall of my own self-esteem and worth.

Face it: many women are already prone to feeling poorly about themselves and comparing themselves to other women.

Add your husband yearning to look at other women and you have a recipe for a crumbling self-image. Here are three ways porn addiction hurt my self-esteem.

1) Competition

When I knew that he was looking at porn, I felt the need to compete for his attention. I thought that if he needed porn to be satisfied then I was not doing enough. I tried to "win" his affection back by attempting to imitate what he liked to watch. In essence, I thought I needed to look like a porn star and act like a porn star just so he would notice me.

But trying to look and act like something or someone you're not just takes a toll after a while. I was just a regular person, flaws and all—how could I compete with a professional production? Pretty soon I lost who I was. I became numb. I forgot how to enjoy sex. I distinctly remember asking him one time if I was better than porn. Of course, he said yes. But, of course, I couldn't believe it. There was this blurred line of sexual intimacy and putting on a show.

2) Inadequacy

Have you ever tried to reach a goal or be part of a team over and over again only to realize that you just weren't good enough each time? It hurts. Porn hurts your spouse's self-esteem. I never felt good enough. He wanted to watch other women instead of being with me. Every time I thought I satisfied him, he would still go back to pornography.

I lost weight, put makeup on every day, and made sure to dress "sexy."

I tried to act the part of a porn star.
None of that mattered.

Again, I didn't measure up to the images that were ingrained in his mind. Eventually, the feeling of inadequacy led me to believe that I had no worth; no worth as a wife, a woman, a mother, a friend, a person. The feeling of never being enough crushed my self-esteem.

3) Objectification

It's often said that pornography addiction leads the individual to see other people as sexualized objects. It is so true. I felt like an object. I was only there to be pretty and fulfill every sexual need. At that point, there was no connection, no true intimacy. I was just body parts and sexual acts. I knew that he didn't see me as a whole person then because sex wasn't about connecting deeper or putting each other first, it felt like it was only about what he wanted.

I spoke with my husband recently about this aspect of porn addiction. He said that when he was looking at porn, it didn't feel like the performers were real people. He said that, to him, watching porn was basically watching body parts. When people are stripped down to only being seen as body parts, dehumanization begins. Talk about a hit to your self-esteem when you don't feel like a human.

Porn hurts your spouse's self-esteem.

And after it's been torn down, self-esteem is a very difficult thing to build back up. It is something that I struggle with to this day, to this minute, this very second. I am no longer the person I was before this addiction affected my marriage.

Having gone through this addiction and come out the other end (God is so good!), trust me when I say, **get help for your porn addiction**, but don't forget to find help for your spouse's well-being.

One great place you can start is MyPilgrimage.com, and tell her to check out Recover.org.

Porn addiction causes more damage to the people around you than you think. But there is hope and there can be healing, my husband and I are proof of that! So don't give up.

My PILGRIMAGE
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